

A conversation with David Alpert, October 5, 2015

Participants

- David Alpert – Founder, Greater Greater Washington
- Alexander Berger – Program Officer, U.S. Policy, Open Philanthropy Project

Note: These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by David Alpert.

Summary

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with David Alpert of Greater Greater Washington (GGWash) to follow up on GGWash's activities since it received a 2-year grant from the Open Philanthropy Project in 2015. Conversation topics included staff and board updates, funding opportunities, and program activities.

Staff and board updates

Staff hiring

GGWash has dedicated a lot of time and energy recently to the process of hiring a Managing Director.

Sarah Guidi is GGWash's new Managing Director; she will begin working on October 19, 2015. Ms. Guidi has experience helping non-profit organizations develop policies, grow boards, and build organizational capacity. Her skills will be very useful for GGWash, particularly in this phase of change and expansion.

The hiring committee for this position consisted of four members of GGWash's volunteer editorial board. The committee reviewed resumes, rated candidates privately, discussed the ratings as a group, and narrowed the list of candidates. Committee members then conducted phone screenings and performed another round of ratings. The most promising candidates underwent interviews with both hiring committee members and board members who are involved in relevant work, such as development and fundraising. Interviewers separately rated interviewees and then discussed the ratings as a group.

To assess Ms. Guidi's grasp of and alignment with GGWash in key issue areas (as they were not directly within her area of expertise), interviewers also asked her to describe how she would handle different scenarios that might arise. GGWash then conducted in-depth reference checks and decided to make an offer.

Board development

GGWash has made offers to two potential new board members, and is currently awaiting their responses. GGWash prefers to recruit two board members at a time.

Funding opportunities

GGWash has devoted some more effort to corporate and foundation outreach, but has not yet made significant progress in raising more funds. As a group blog seeking to expand and diversify its advocacy efforts, GGWash does not fall neatly within many foundations' preset funding categories.

Program activities

Networking

Mr. Alpert has been meeting with dozens of stakeholders, including planners, developers, staff from non-profit housing organizations and other social justice groups, community organizers, and other activists working on land use issues. Through these efforts, GGWash hopes to determine the most appropriate resolutions to put forward in Washington, D.C.'s upcoming Comprehensive Plan update, build a broad, city-wide political coalition around housing and land use issues, and create a roadmap towards achieving the organization's main goals in the coming years. GGWash plans to experiment with a few strategies on a variety of issues to begin with, and eventually prioritize those that prove to get the most traction.

Community engagement

Over the long run, GGWash envisions a two-prong community engagement strategy, focused on deepening the engagement of existing supporters while broadening its base through outreach.

Deepening engagement of existing supporters

GGWash's traditional supporters include GGWash blog readers, individuals who are in favor of increasing housing development in the city, and others, many of whom work professionally in a field related to planning, transit, or development. GGWash wants to encourage new types of engagement from these individuals (e.g. by developing more of an online organizing capacity and by encouraging them to attend GGWash events in person). Anecdotally, this population seems to consist disproportionately of younger professionals, usually white, who are fairly new to D.C.

Broadening the base

Most of D.C. does not fit the predominately younger, white, professional demographic of many of GGWash's current supporters, and GGWash wants to have more engagement with the rest of D.C.'s population. GGWash aims to broaden its constituency by engaging with residents of other neighborhoods to ensure that all citizens, including long-time and low-income residents, are included, particularly in the upcoming Comprehensive Plan update process. GGWash believes that its

advocacy efforts will be more successful when a more diverse cross-section of the city's population is represented.

Advocacy

Current context

Washington, D.C.'s Office of Planning forecasts that if the city were to build on all of the currently available undeveloped land, there would be enough housing to accommodate residents for the near future – an approximately 20-year period – though Mr. Alpert worries that the method used for generating such estimates might be circular. The current mayor is prioritizing issues like affordable housing and homelessness, which Mr. Alpert is happy to see. She wants to put a homeless shelter in each of the city's eight wards.

Currently, city policy is guided more by community input than by a unified vision among top officials, which makes this an opportune time for residents, particularly those from low-income neighborhoods, to advocate for increased development of all housing types across the city.

GGWash wants to see a more equitable distribution of new market rate housing across all neighborhoods, including wealthier ones such as those west of Rock Creek Park. In general, residents in Washington, D.C.'s wealthier neighborhoods tend to resist housing development in their areas, and the current Planning Director does not seem to be advocating for higher density in wealthier neighborhoods. Given the Office of Planning's current outlook, GGWash might find itself having to resist the Office's approach rather than work alongside it.

Washington, D.C.'s Comprehensive Plan update

Washington, D.C. will soon be updating its Comprehensive Plan. The process represents a rare opportunity for elected officials to make decisions on land use issues, as council members vote on and make amendments to the Comprehensive Plan.

GGWash views the update process as an important opportunity to discuss citywide housing policy and as a vehicle to initiate its first round of community organizing.

Given its broad scope, engaging the community in the Comprehensive Plan update process might be more challenging than recruiting community members for smaller scale advocacy projects. GGWash hopes to find a synergy between its project-based advocacy efforts and broader strategies like the Comprehensive Plan update process.

Washington, D.C. Zoning Commission

In Washington, D.C., zoning decisions are made by the Zoning Commission. These decisions are generally made separately from the political process, though the

Zoning Commission takes politicians' views into account. In theory, zoning decisions are meant to be based on the Comprehensive Plan. However, depending on how the Commission interprets the content of the Comprehensive Plan, city-wide objectives may not always be reflected in local zoning decisions.

GGWash is hoping to begin to mobilize a larger and more diverse group of community members to testify at Zoning Commission hearings.

Department of Housing and Community Development's Consolidated Plan update

The Department of Housing and Community Development is going to be updating its Consolidated Plan, and GGWash might participate in the process if it sees promising opportunities.

Website redesign and branding

A committee of volunteer editors is working on the redesign of GGWash's website and on the organization's branding, including the logo.

*All Open Philanthropy Project conversations are available at
<http://www.givewell.org/conversations>*